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ABSTRACT

In contrast to case study, where participants learn vicariously through other peoples' cases, the case story approach invites people to learn through writing and telling about their own experiences as practitioners. This study of school leaders using case stories in university classrooms and in-service leadership academies focused on what is said and how it is said; how context influences story form and content; and how the case story serves as context of socially situated activity. Research for the study was carried out at 2 universities and 2 leadership academies over a year, with 75 administrators from elementary, middle, and high school settings, both public and private, and from urban and suburban communities participating. The case story research had five steps: (1) freewrite; (2) writing case stories; (3) telling, listening, and discussing case stories; (4) small group reflection; and (5) whole group reflection and conclusion. Results of the study indicated that the individual and collective quest to make sense of complex realities through case stories was critical to learning. Case stories attest to the strength of participants' personal perspectives, are organic rather than mechanistic, and finally, may serve important purposes integrating personal experience with administrative theory. (Contains 11 references.) (ND)

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A CASE FOR STORIES: TOWARD FURTHER UNDERSTANDING OF SITUATED KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICE

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The purpose of this study was to understand further how educational administrators engage in collaborative inquiry and reflection around case stories, that is written and oral descriptions of real life "close-to-the-bone" leadership situations (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 1995). In contrast to case study where participants learn vicariously through other peoples' cases, the case story approach invites people to learn through writing and telling about their own personal experiences as practitioners. Our aim was to examine how practitioners and students learn and what they learn when they write and exchange case stories. Extending previous research about using case stories to teach educational administration (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 1996), this study focused on school leaders using case stories in university classrooms and in-service leadership academies in terms of 1) what is said and how it is said; 2)how context influences story form and content; and 3) the case story as a context of socially situated activity (Lave, 1996).

Our study offers an interpretive perspective rooted in the metaphor of school administration as story. It is a viewpoint which is interested in how human beings deal with experience by constructing stories and listening to the stories of others. We share Gardner's (1995) view that "the story is a basic human cognitive form; the artful creation and articulation of stories constitutes a fundamental part of the leader's vocation" (p. 43). The case story is presented as a construct with three important characteristics. It is highly personal, it has a communal aspect and it is embedded in ecological systems of thought and the social world of activity.

The case story is viewed as a form of "situated knowledge" (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and, as such, represents a vital yet often misunderstood dimension of learning and sharing of a practice. In this perspective, administrative knowledge does not necessarily denote exemplary thought and practice. It does, however, conceive of learning as an aspect of culturally and historically situated activity (Lave, 1996) and thus refers to social, cognitive and emotional structures and administrative activities which are sometimes shared, sometimes idiosyncratic and sometimes open to question. This kind of knowledge, we believe, is crafted in workplace contexts through stories which represent a unification of personal knowledge and experience.

THE CASE STORY APPROACH

Case story has been used in a variety of settings, such as leadership institutes, professional development programs, workshops and graduate level classrooms. The case story model requires a minimum of three hours to implement and includes five steps which are simply outlined below (See Maslin-Ostrowski, & Ackerman, In Press, for a more detailed description.). The facilitator's role is to create a positive learning atmosphere and to guide participants through each step of the case story writing and telling process.

Step 1: The Freewrite

The "freewrite" activity is designed to warm participants to writing about issues of practice and leadership. Everyone is asked to write for seven minutes using a stem such as, "The obstacle to leadership for me is..." After writing, participants are divided into groups of three to read aloud and talk about their "freewrites."

Step 2: Writing Case Stories

After the facilitator provides explicit directions and shares an example, participants are invited to write a one page case story that describes a real life, "close-to-the-bone" leadership dilemma or critical incident.

Step 3: Telling, Listening & Discussing Case Stories

In triads, participants are guided to take turns telling, listening to and discussing case stories. The conversation is structured so that the storyteller reads and elaborates on her story without interruption, followed by a discussion of her story that she observes and listens to initially before joining the dialogue. The goal is not to find a single solution, but rather to examine alternatives and consider the consequences.

Step 4: Small Group Reflection

Triads are merged into groups of six where they are asked to consider what the experience of hearing others' stories was like, as well as to reflect on what it was like to share and discuss their own case stories.

Step 5: Whole Group Reflection & Conclusion

The small groups are asked to report important findings and the entire group is then invited to reflect on their learning experiences.

METHODOLOGY

The study aimed to paint a thick description of the school leaders' conceptualization of their working-learning contexts, their interactions and their case stories. Research was carried out at four sites (two universities and two leadership academies) over the course of one year. Through in-depth interviews, observations and document analysis, we investigated how educational leaders used case stories to share their dilemmas and practices. The sample included 75 administrators from elementary, middle and high school settings, both public and private, and from urban and suburban communities.

Fieldwork placed us on a regular basis with small groups of practitioners where we could observe them exchanging case stories in graduate classrooms, at professional development programs and leadership academies in order to document what occurred and to develop transcripts of dialogue that participants could later respond to, that is reflect on what happened. Interviews were conducted with individuals as well as with conversation groups to probe deeper into how the practitioners used case stories and what that meant to them. Another goal of the interviews was to explore why people chose to tell particular stories and to get a better understanding of how context fostered or inhibited the telling of stories. We used a focus group interview format with conversation groups (groups typically were composed of three people) which allowed the participants to reflect collectively on the process and meaning of stories they had recently experienced. Open-ended questions were posed to draw out stories that emerged from the group members' experience, including autobiographical stories that connected to their present work. Whenever possible verbal communication was audio taped and notes were taken.

Data analysis, which began with data collection, included writing field notes, writing analytic memos, coding data into categories, triangulating findings and a search for patterns and inconsistencies. We would periodically present tentative findings to participants to check if we had accurately portrayed their perspectives. Our interest was in sharing the interpretation with participants, that is we tried to interpret with them, not simply interpret them.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Doing Things with Words

Case stories connect words and deeds. Each participant crafted a unique case story about something that he experienced, something that mattered to him and put it together in his own words. The topics and themes participants chose to write and talk about are wide ranging. People told stories of fear and stories of hope. Some case stories represent universal themes, such as courage, unity, fellowship, compatibility, justice, as well as conflict, isolation, division and separation. Other themes are more parochial, for example how to keep one's classroom from being trashed by the community education groups and frustration over unannounced visits from supervisors.

Some stories told of heroic efforts, for example about overcoming the odds in a third world school and about redesigning an entire school system. Most stories, however, portrayed everyday matters of practice. People wrote about what they knew and was meaningful to them, for example coping with change. Through their stories participants captured issues and dilemmas of being a practitioner in today's educational arena.

A prevalent theme for participants was conflict. The conflict they wrote about took a variety of forms, yet it was a primary focus of many case stories. Numerous case stories centered around interpersonal conflicts with colleagues. Some participants told about misunderstandings

and disagreements. Others described a clash of work styles. Some participants told about conflicts with parents of students. What follows is one such story.

What is a Mother's Job?

I recently conferenced (went into battle) with an enraged parent about an assignment I expected all my students to complete. Two of our school improvement goals were to enhance fourth and fifth graders' ability to write expository essays and to increase understanding of the scientific method. All students were informed that they must create a science fair project which would count for three quarters of the second term science grade. To aid this project, every student was given: a list of 1000 project ideas, a science notebook, a display board, a three month time line (each step had its own due date), and teacher directed lessons regarding each step of the project.

All parents were notified of the project and they signed and returned a contract stating that they understood the assignment. Recognizing that some students might have limited access to materials, students were told they could use the school library and computers during recess and center time, as well as before and after school.

On the due date of the final project, an angry parent demanded a conference with the principal and me. The mother stated, "remove your blinders and accept that my husband and I have jobs." (This woman is a pharmacist.) She continued to scream, "We don't have time for garbage like this! This is your job, not mine. Why isn't the learning taking place in school where it belongs?" After recovering from the shock of this outburst, I calmly reminded her of all the services that we offer her gifted child and every other child in the school. I showed her the two progress reports that she signed which stated that her child was falling behind in science. I said that we understand parents are busy and stressed. I commented that is why we gave the project a three month time line. I also mentioned that, technically, the only thing that had to be completed at home was the actual experiment.

Nothing we said could pacify this mother. She threatened, "You better not give my son an F...I will write to the superintendent indicating that this assignment represents prejudice." At this point I basically lost all semblance of patience. I told her that I do not give any child a grade, they earn it. As the shouting began again, I quietly stood up and said, "Do what you feel is best." Then in a near whisper I asked, "When one has a child, tell me, shouldn't her primary occupation be that of mother?"

There were also case stories that depicted the tension between policy and reality. For example, more than one participant told about new school policies that detrack students, that is, shift from homogeneous grouping to heterogeneous. One case story told of a personal struggle to reconcile the policy and belief that all students should be taught algebra with the stark, harsh reality that children represent huge differences in ability and motivation levels. Another case story

that focused on grouping and math reform is as follows:

Math Reform at ABC Middle School

Last summer the math department met and decided to create heterogeneously grouped math classes. Although this change required each math teacher to have only one preparation, many teachers did not realize how much more work it entails to teach diverse math ability students in one classroom. So this summer, as department head, I gathered a group of teachers to begin to redesign the curriculum. We created curriculum frameworks for each grade and devised alternative teaching strategies and activities. As the new school year began, I was extremely proud of our accomplishments. I was convinced that we had finally established a common belief that higher level math that was taught to a few in the past cannot be taught to all in the same manner. As the half-year mark approached, however, I sat down to assess our math program. Teachers' all too familiar words echoed in my head, "My students don't even know their multiplication facts. How can they possibly handle this advanced math book?"

Yet another conflict that participants told about is the tension between policy or administrative decisions and personal philosophy. Along these lines, one participant described her dilemma over having to support her principal's decision to place a non-English speaking student in seventh grade when she believed that despite language barriers, the child belonged in eighth grade. As Director of the English for Speakers of Other Languages program, she had to represent her administrator's decision to the parents. When developing her case story, this participant struggled with the ethics of how she handled the situation.

The themes and stories of everyday actions cited here are just a sample of what the participants decided to tell. Each participant constructed a case story about a meaningful event in which he or she was an active player. Words were transformed into sentences which became stories. The content that participants selected for their case stories was influenced by the relationship between context and action, which we will address next.

Participants Personally Define The Context Of Their Experience

When developing and reflecting on case stories, some participants defined the context of their experience in personal terms. While most participants described local and sometimes broader contexts, some also focused on a personal construction of context. This group of participants wrote and/or talked about their personal histories or inner experiences which further added their own selves to the lived experience. If we are to understand how people learn because of their practice, it may be important to consider these different perspectives of context. This view is consistent with Lave, Murtaugh and de la Rocha (1984) who contend,

> context refers to a relationship rather than a single entity. For on the one hand, context connotes an identifiable, durable framework for the activity, with

> properties that transcend the experience of individuals, exist prior to them, and are entirely beyond their control. On the other hand, context is experienced differently by different individuals. (pp. 71-72)

One participant who was sensitive to the personal contextual features of his story wrote about an incident that occurred thirteen years ago. Here is John's (pseudonym) case story:

Everyone Should Be Self-Directed? Really? No, Not Really?

It was thirteen years ago and I was an administrator at the University. I had just finished my doctoral program and was asked to stay on. Throughout my doctoral studies I was heavily engaged in the work of X. What X said, I believed. No questions, no reflection, no process. Among his teachings was the notion that adults are self-directed learners. They want to be! Given an opportunity they will welcome with open arms the joyous expression of self-direction. Believing that I dived into my new role. I had my staff develop learning contracts thinking it would make them self-directed. One night after work Mary (not her real name) came to my office and said, "Some people like to be self-directed and others like to be followers...I like to be a follower." She continued, "If you told me to do something, I would; but you don't do that. I feel I will have to leave because I don't have any direction and I don't want to be self-directed." What should I have said to Mary in this situation? Is this an ethical dilemma?

In order to explain and understand his actions, John related this incident to his personal background. He placed the experience in the personal context of what he was doing at the time. He reports that when he began his career, he was committed to the theories and tenets of a leading thinker in his area of education. When reflecting on his case story with the other members of his group, he told how as a young graduate student he had the privilege of spending time with this national figure. He was assigned the job of driving the man to and from the airport, and of taking him out to dinner. The two developed a special relationship, one that has endured to the present. He animatedly shared stories of how they had long conversations together and how much he has learned from this esteemed individual. As a newcomer to the field, John followed the philosophy to a tee. Thus when a staff member confronted him and said she disagreed with this approach, he did nothing to accommodate her different style. The person quit.

Why did this memory endure? When talking about why he selected this particular story he said that it had been nagging at him for years, even though at the time it happened it seemed insignificant, a nonevent. The memory may never have resurfaced or the story would have been written differently if not for subsequent experiences and learning. Accumulated experience and knowledge clashed with what he had done. The meaning he attributed to this particular experience shifted over time. It changed as he added experiences and developed ideas. The remembered experience may also have informed his future encounters with people. The meaning of new experiences may have been influenced by earlier deeds. Thus the interactions between external

and personal contexts, both past and present, along with his direct actions in practice, both past and present, suggest that context is central to John's learning.

By expanding the personal context to the present, the tone and emphasis of this case story are better understood. John remarked that he would not have selected this title for the story or ended it with these questions if he had written the story at the time of the event, in fact, he said that it probably would not have been a story. Eventually, however, this participant came to realize that as a novice professional he had accepted the teachings without question. As an experienced practitioner he described a different personal context and through the case story process tells of his evolved understanding of actions. Past and present contexts have helped to shape this case story. The case story also gives form to what he thinks, knows and feels about his practice.

Through his case story, thoughts and beliefs were connected to daily deeds and vice versa. The communal nature of case stories, that is when participants share stories with each other about what has happened to them and how that touches their lives, was also central to determining his understanding, and this will be discussed next.

Case Story as a Communal Construct

A central finding of this study is that "story knowledge" is not only a personal construct, but also a communal construct. Our observations of the case story as a context for sharing stories are concerned not only with how participants come to their stories, but in interacting with one another, how *contexts* are grasped, interpreted and given a kind of narrative meaning. We acknowledge, however, that the meaning and context of context is itself dangerously polysemic and, as a construct, often made to do a lot of work. We think of context here in the sense of the everyday activities that educational administrators describe as background and foreground for their stories. We share Bruner's view that the method of negotiating and renegotiating meanings through the mediation of narrative interpretation is supported by a group's stored narrative resources and its "equally precious tool kit of interpretive techniques; its myths, its typology of human plights, but also its traditions for locating and resolving divergent narratives" (Bruner, 1990).

A number of features were manifested in the stories and tales forged by school leaders with their peers about their schools and the broader environment of their craft. Based on our limited data we can only speculate at this early stage that these features are not likely composed of discrete components, hierarchically organized in a linear relationship to one another. Rather, it may be more helpful to conceive of sharing case stories as a culture of constructed thought in which individuals participate according to a variety of logics. This perspective is compatible with Clandenin and Connolly (1987) who have explored the individual biographies/stories of teachers by studying elements of their life stories as a genre of narrative inquiry.

In examining data from our focus group interviews with educational leaders, we asked: What are the ways in which participants are utilizing narrative to invoke their life experiences and explain their practices to each other? Our observations are influenced by two key assumptions: 1) human beings come with a set of predispositions to construe the social world in a particular way and to act upon their construals (Bruner, 1990) and, 2) the acquisition of a language is context sensitive. We began to discern a number of patterns in the ways that stories were shared and the themes that emerged in the sharing. With an appreciation of context, a person seems better able to grasp not only the lexicon but the appropriate aspects of the grammar of his or her language. We noticed a kind of narrative grammar emerging that we believe enabled people to assimilate knowledge in ways that contributed to their narratives and their story-telling capacities. In a previous paper (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 1996) we described this as "real talk." We now speculate that in many cases, the case story groups have the potential to develop a kind of host system of social, cognitive and emotional structures for nurturing the capacity to pay attention to the meaning of individual experience and its power to instruct. For example, the majority of case stories, as noted earlier, focused on some aspect of interpersonal conflict. Most conversations required not only the retelling and revelation of the experience but inevitably created a return to a level of feeling and emotion that the original experience engendered. In our view, this suggested that participants were not entirely "finished" with the experience. We also noted that this kind of tension was reflected in the cases of some participants engaged in writing their stories. In general, the particular choice of adjectives and verbs, the continuities and discontinuities, references, comparisons and similes served to recreate a mood and a disposition on the part of the teller and the participants. In short, the telling of the stories invariably returned to some of the heat that was part of the original conflict. Narrating stories thus becomes not only an expository act but a rhetorical one.

Group Structure Encourages Accountability

A related finding is our emerging view that the structure of the case story group itself makes it less likely that participants will hide from its demands as it requires each of them to be accountable to a group of peers. Participants in case stories are seemingly united, not by the authority of absolute facts but by the mutual quest for potential meaning. The group itself is *context sensitive* — and it progresses far better when the participants grasp in some way, and not always tied to language, the significance of what is being talked about or the situation in which the talk is occurring. With an appreciation of context, the participants seem better able to grasp not only the lexicon but the appropriate aspects of the story.

For example, we observed Tom, the principal of a large urban high school telling a story to a group of peers (fellow administrators) in which he described his attempts to bring his faculty together over an unpopular issue. He talked about the creative ways in which he influenced the union leadership, under normal conditions an unfriendly adversary, to bring the faculty to the meeting to begin to resolve the issue. We were struck by a number of what appeared to be imbedded or implicit understandings in this story, for example how administrators feel about

unions, how thorny issues get resolved, where Tom learned his technique, etcetera.

The Possibility of Courageous Conversation

Finally, we find that the case story, as a personal and communal construct, calls for a kind of critical thinking and feeling in an open and disclosive speech environment in which participants are in effect working out issues that they may not understand, have not thought about or ever talked about. It opens people up to one another, for better or worse. Thus, the conversational format permits and sometimes even requires a particular kind of voice — a stepping beyond the conventional language and expression that usually holds ideas, thoughts and feelings in place leading potentially to significantly different levels of engagement for participants.

In considering the interactions of participants in their case story groups across the settings in this study, we have consistently witnessed deeper levels of communication suggesting, in our view, a quality that is not often used in the context of conversation — namely, courage. The narrative structure opens people up to one another and new possibilities for interaction. It sanctions collaboration, the sharing of perspectives and values forms of expression often accorded marginal status. Perhaps, the future of the story in educational leadership depends on the ability to "risk" a courageous conversation as a return to the most fundamental and essential social relation.

CONCLUSION

This study has increased our understanding of case stories in the teaching and learning of educational administration and has shown how case story, personal history, work contexts and learning are interrelated and interdependent. Consistent with other perspectives on the newly found uses of narrative and story in teacher and administrator education, our findings affirm that human activity and experience are laden with meaning and that stories are a fundamental vehicle by which that meaning is communicated. Administrative knowledge and practice were intertwined for our participants, and learning with case stories could not be easily separated from these two dimensions. The significance of the findings, in our view, expands our understanding of "story knowledge" and "story wisdom" and points to the relationships between personal stories, cultural forces influencing these stories, and the processes of coming to a leadership identity. The following summary attempts to sharpen these distinctions by describing the central features of our conclusions.

The individual and collective quest to make sense of complex realities through case stories was found to be critical to learning that emerged for our participants. Administrative knowledge and practices in the form stories was a deeply personal construct for participants which appears to be resistant to objectification in neat taxonomic hierarchies and classifications. Stories are rooted in deep personal experiences whose meaning and significance may be seriously underestimated unless school administrators' work is studied in the rich context of their lives. Interpretivist

studies like this one offer promising ways of accessing the significance to school leaders of situational dilemmas in the formation of their stories and "story knowledge."

The deeply personal and the idiosyncratic aspects of case stories may be framed in several ways. First, the case stories themselves attest to the strength of participants' personal perspectives. Neither professional norms nor university studies and programs were able to subdue the unique personal perspectives these school leaders brought to their leadership studies. Polanyi (1966) argues that personal knowledge may be so deeply embedded that it becomes tacit. In this perspective, principals are often thought to know more than they can tell. Our tentative findings suggest school leaders do know what they tell.

Another feature of school leaders' case stories is that they are organic rather than mechanistic. This perspective is consistent with a central conclusion of this study: that "story knowledge" is not only a personal construct, but also a communal construct embedded in ecological systems of thought (Bohm, 1994). These organic features manifest themselves in the stories and tales which school leaders forge with their peers, their schools and the broader environment of their craft. This study argues that school leaders forge their stories in unique ways, participating differentially in the broader craft knowledge which interacts with their personal experience.

Our third point is that case stories may serve important (but, as yet poorly understood) purposes integrating personal experience with administrative theory. The study argues that "story knowledge" is not to be equated with codified propositional thought which can be dissected, re-packaged and dispensed to the administrative community. Furthermore, it is not even necessary to construe "story wisdom" as exemplary practice which should necessarily be emulated. The complex challenges of schools as workplaces, however, require administrators whose knowledge is embedded in the authority of their personal experiences and the wisdom of their stories.

One implication of this study is that university faculties and professional developers must consider the personal frameworks from which school leaders craft their stories and their wisdom. Also, more consideration ought to be given to the unique ways in which school leaders participate in the broader cultures of their craft. We conclude that teaching and learning the craft of school leadership can be enhanced by developing opportunities to link case stories with experience and personal histories, by grasping the relationship of contexts to learning and practicing, and by creating conditions that connect practitioner to practitioner.

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